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ABSTRACT

This digest discusses the issues involved in implementing middle school foreign language programs. A number of implementation and instructional issues are highlighted, including: scheduling, staffing, teacher recruitment, teacher certification, staff development, curriculum development, teaching methods, and instructional materials. (VWL)

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Implementing Middle School Foreign Language Programs. ERIC Digest.

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ERIC Clearinghouse on Languages and Linguistics
Center for Applied Linguistics

ERIC Digest

Implementing Middle School Foreign Language Programs

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Once a school district has selected appropriate program models for foreign language study, a number of implementation and instructional issues must be considered, including scheduling, staffing, and curricula. What follows is a discussion of these issues, as well as useful information to aid in the implementation of a middle school foreign language program. For additional information on planning middle school programs, see Willetts & Short, 1990.

Implementation Issues

Scheduling can be a difficult issue for an administrator who must balance state requirements and student interests in an effective school-day design. When planning to offer foreign language instruction to all students each year, administrators are presented with the task of slotting sequential foreign language courses into the already over-crowded daily schedule. Some schools are attempting to solve this problem through block or modular scheduling and are advocating interdisciplinary team organization (see *Instructional Issues*). In one survey, flexible scheduling within blocks for teams was being used in 20%-31% of the middle schools surveyed (Alexander & McEwin, 1989). Descriptions of other innovative schedules are noted in Alexander & McEwin's report.

For schools with a foreign language teacher who teaches two different languages, the schedule should be planned so classes of each language are grouped together. For example, all Spanish classes may be offered in the morning, and all French classes in the afternoon. This type of scheduling facilitates the teacher's planning and organization. It is recommended that teachers be provided with one preparation period for each language they teach.

Staffing. Middle school foreign language teachers should know the linguistic and cultural aspects of the language they are teaching, be trained in foreign language teaching methods, and be able to adapt instruction to the needs and interests of middle school students. They should be able to direct activities in a firm and understanding manner; be committed to the role and importance of language learning; be able to match appropriate activities to middle school foreign language objectives; and be aware of student ability ranges and learning rates at the middle school level.

Teacher Recruitment. Certified high school foreign language teachers and bilingual elementary teachers can be recruited and retrained for the middle school through in-service or continuing education courses. Administrators should also review the backgrounds of current staff members to uncover potential candidates for new courses, and look for teachers from the local community, including certified retirees or native speakers who have language teacher training and experience. Teacher preparation programs at local or state colleges and universities may also be a good source of qualified foreign language teachers.

Teacher Certification. Although it is preferable that administrators, teachers, and counselors in the middle grades be trained and certified to teach in the middle school, this is not always possible. The middle school is only beginning to emerge as an independent structure from the elementary or high school, and teacher preparation programs remain largely bilateral, offering only elementary or secondary certificates. Ideally, a middle school foreign language teacher would have K-12 certification, or a middle grade endorsement on an elementary or secondary certificate. Several states permit teachers to begin teaching a foreign language while pursuing a course of study for the proper certification (Herrera, 1988).

It is best for middle school teachers to be certified in each foreign language they are teaching. A teacher of multi-language exploratory courses could begin teaching with a minor in one or more foreign languages, while completing coursework towards certification in each language. It is advisable to recruit teachers with a background in several languages to facilitate the implementation of a program that offers more than one language.

Staff Development. Opportunities should be provided for middle school foreign language teachers to improve their skills. Summer institutes and in-service training programs should be organized where teachers can select, plan, schedule, conduct, and evaluate various activities that will enhance their own language teaching skills. Teachers should have opportunities to work on curriculum development activities that integrate aspects of elementary and secondary curricula into the middle school plan. This experience can facilitate the articulation of foreign language instruction across school levels.

Curriculum Development. The middle school foreign language curriculum should include objectives, content, activities, and evaluative techniques appropriate to the type of programs (e.g., exploratory, sequential) offered, and should reflect characteristics of the middle school curriculum such as balance, articulation, and flexibility. The range of interests, abilities, attitudes, and maturity levels of middle school students should be considered. (See Maryland State Department of Education, 1989).

Instructional Issues

Restructured middle schools are not only reforming curricula, but are also modifying their instructional organization. It is recommended that middle grade educators establish related interdisciplinary curricular topics. District curriculum leaders should work collaboratively with school staff to identify and develop areas and topics for interdisciplinary teaching. The curriculum should enable students to see the connections within and across various subjects.

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Team Teaching. A popular alternative to the traditional self-contained classroom is the establishment of interdisciplinary teams. The interdisciplinary approach arranges teachers from different subject areas into teams that are responsible for a group of students. The objective of the team approach is to provide a supportive environment for adolescent middle school students that allows teachers to guide and tailor instruction with regard to student needs and abilities. Typically, the team includes a core of teachers from four disciplines: mathematics, science, social studies, and language arts. It is strongly recommended that the foreign language teacher become part of the team. Foreign language staff should have a resource or planning period to interact with the other team teachers.

The team often plans thematic instruction that each teacher can reinforce and expand on in his or her given subject area. Foreign language study, particularly because of its interdisciplinary nature (culture, geography, history, language arts, etc.), lends itself well to an interdisciplinary approach. As discussed below (see *Content-Based Lessons*), the foreign language curriculum can have content-based units or lessons that permit subjects such as art, music, and social studies to be naturally woven into the language curriculum. (See Curtain & Martinez, 1989, for sample content-based lessons.)

A subset of the team approach is a paired teaching strategy, in which two teachers are assigned to teach a course that combines two subject areas. This flexible strategy can be a scheduling alternative for districts that wish to implement a foreign language program, yet do not have enough time slots initially available.

Content-Based Lessons. One means of combining language instruction with other areas of the curriculum is to use the target language to present lessons in subjects such as science, math, and social studies. For example, the foreign language teacher may conduct a simple science experiment with the students who hypothesize about the process, observe and record the activity, and draw conclusions about the result in the target language. For beginning students, the foreign language teacher may write math word problems in the target language or have students find countries, cities, and other geographical features on a map and learn about places and cultures in social studies-based foreign language lessons.

Communicative Approach. In this approach to foreign language instruction, students use the target language in class a great deal through communicative activities such as games, role-playing, and problem-solving tasks. Other characteristics of this approach include the use of authentic materials and small group or paired activities. Adolescent students should be able to explore and learn language through a variety of ways, including activities such as drama and music, discussion and debate, experimentation and discovery, partnerships and peer tutoring, and multi-media and multi-sensory activities. Early adolescents have special physical, intellectual, emotional, and social needs, so it is important to make learning a participatory activity. Providing students with opportunities to work in pairs or groups with problem-solving situations assists in the development of their self-confidence, cooperation, and achievement. When students work in small groups, they are more apt to participate--especially those students who are shy or less proficient than others in the class--because they talk and share ideas among their peers. By using small group learning techniques, including cooperative learning strategies, foreign language teachers promote greater communication among their students in the target language as groups set out to fulfill learning tasks, complete assignments, check on comprehension, prepare reports, etc. Small group activities are especially recommended for augmenting oral language among students.

Cooperative learning is a highly effective strategy for small group work that provides for diversity and individuality in learning styles, and aids students in the socialization process. Cooperative learning is also useful for teachers who teach students of varying proficiency levels in their classes. If teachers arrange students heterogeneously, the more proficient students can assist the less proficient ones in the group. Peer tutoring and peer response groups capitalize upon the strong desire of young adolescents to participate with peers. It is necessary for the teachers, however, to design tasks that require active participation of all group members.

Instructional Materials

Authentic materials and realia. Many research studies have shown that students learn a second language best through context (Krashen and Terrell, 1983). One interesting way to provide a foreign language context for students is through the use of realia and authentic materials from the target country (Berwald, 1987). Realia such as posters, foods, and common objects from the foreign country can give students a more authentic language learning experience. Authentic articles in newspapers and magazines are ideal sources of topical vocabulary, current events, and rhetorical style. Geltrich-Ludgate and Tovar (1987) list over seventy examples of realia and recommend uses for each item.

Technology and media aids can also be used to surround students with the authentic foreign language and culture. Video, especially, lends itself to the transmission of cultural information and allows students to observe the language of gestures and other non-verbal communication. Satellite now brings live programming from foreign countries into the classroom, and computers with modems permit telecommunications among students around the globe (Krause, 1990). The familiar penpal activity can become even more motivating and satisfying when students send messages to each other via electronic mail or videotape. In today's high tech society, possibilities for cultural experiences and foreign language learning using authentic materials and media are expanding rapidly.

Conclusion

Renewed concern about middle level education in the United States has contributed to the number of school districts seeking to implement foreign language programs at the middle school level. Implementing a foreign language program requires careful planning, and teachers and administrators must consider the specific learning needs of students at this level. Foreign language study can be an enriching experience. It is important to provide students with programs that are challenging, enjoyable, and suited to their specific educational needs.

Additional information on implementing middle school foreign language programs can be found in *A Planning and Resource Guide for Foreign Languages in Maryland Middle Schools*, available in 1991 from the Maryland State Department of Education.

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